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SUBJECT: BABIL'S SOI TRANSITION: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (S) Summary: In meetings September 10-20 with Sons of Iraq (SOI) leaders, tribal sheikhs, Iraqi Army and Police commanders, local councilors, Babil Governor Salam, Provincial Council Chair Messaoudi and PRT, EPRT and 4/3 ID Brigade leadership, leaders in North Babil underscored potentially serious concerns about the transition of the SOI program from Coalition Forces (CF) to and Iraqi Army (IA) management. A perceived sectarian bias and the disposition of approximately 500 current SOIs with active arrest warrants - mostly Sunnis - highlight concerns with a transition plan that continues to evolve. Recent events in North Babil have contributed to a growing sense of unease among Sunnis who were formerly active or passive supporters of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) or Jaish al Islami (JAI). The transition process will require a degree of sensitivity and deftness that provincial security and government leaders have not displayed to date, but Babil has the advantage of following Baghdad in the SOI transition process and may be able to gain from that experience. In addition, PM Maliki has shown that he wants to work with SOI leaders to make the transition a success. End Summary.

¶2. (S) Following Prime Minister Maliki's August 28 announcement of the GOI's intention to transition SOIs to IA management, the PRT, EPRT and 4/3 ID brigade conducted intensive engagements with Governor Salam, PC Chair Messaoudi, IA brigade and battalion leaders, provincial and district Iraqi Police (IP) commanders, North Babil local councilors, and SOI and tribal leaders. As reported in reftel, the transition plan calls for approximately twenty percent of North Babil's current 6,800 SOIs to join the IA or IP, with the remainder absorbed into other civilian GOI jobs. The IA leadership seemed caught off guard by the announcement and, in the the last week of September, had received little guidance from the MOD concerning transition procedures, budgeting, organization or operational orders. The transition process will include a careful vetting of current SOIs against lists of individuals with active warrants. SOI and tribal leaders believe as many as 500 SOIs have current arrest warrants, many for terrorist activities dating back to 2004 and ¶2005. Babil Provincial Director of Police BG Fadhil Raddad has said that SOIs with warrants will be arrested.

¶3. (S) The prospect of facing Iraqi justice is a significant issue for Sunnis in North Babil. Many known to have actively or passively supported AQI and JAI activities willingly joined the SOIs. Local residents proclaim that they were lied to and misled by AQI and there is a general recognition that the boycott of the 2005 provincial elections was a major blunder. A tacit understanding has emerged that those who agree to forego insurgency will be allowed to participate in all aspects of

political and community life in North Babil without regard for prior affiliations. As a result, the Nahiya Council and City Leadership in Jurf as Sukr, Babil's only Sunni-majority Nahiya, is peppered with reconciled suspected AQI and JAI members, and many in the community are enthusiastic members of the SOIs. The Nahiya, once home to intense anti-coalition and anti-GOI insurgency, has enjoyed a period of calm for the past ten months enabling IDPs to return and reconstruction efforts to flourish. The arrest of these SOI members as part of the transition of the program to IA management threatens to destabilize the area again.

14. (S) Jurf as Sukr SOI leader and suspected former JAI leader Hedi Abbas Maki cited employment through the SOI program as well as changes in the IA initiated by PM Maliki as significant factors in the reconciliation of formerly active JAI members. Meeting with the EPRT Leader and 4/3 brigade Commanding Officer September 17, Maki repeated the request that as many SOIs as possible be absorbed into the IA and IP. He also questioned the need to disarm Sunni organizations given the widely perceived presence of armed Badrist and Sadrist militias. Maki voiced concern about sectarianism in the Iraqi justice system, claiming that Sunnis in North Babil are targeted based on flimsy evidence and secret informers. While crediting the dynamic local (Shia) police chief with helping to restore order in North Babil, Maki said there is no trust among Sunnis toward the IPs or IA. He said that if the issue of the outstanding warrants 'is not dealt with wisely there will be trouble.' The GOI has an active warrant for Maki's arrest.

15. (S) Several recent events in North Babil have contributed to a growing sense of unease among Sunnis. An August 30 combined IP and IA operation, with CF overwatch, arrested 26 Sunni SOI members with outstanding warrants. According to CF officers present during some of the arrests, IPs from the provincial capital were particularly rough on detainees and their families. When 19 of the detainees were released shortly after the raid, they described maltreatment by the IPs and were not permitted to

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retrieve their weapons which were retained by the police. In addition, the guilty verdict and death sentence announced September 18 against Fadilia Sunni SOI Ahmed Zaki for his role in a terrorist killing of a dozen Shias in 2005 is perceived to have been an unfair trial tainted by sectarianism. (Note: The PRT has looked closely at this case and has found no basis for questioning the judiciary's handling of this case, but perceptions have their own reality.) Finally, disappointment over anticipated IA and IP hiring of SOIs, more than 4,200 were cleared for the IP and IA and have been awaiting word about employment since early 2008, has bred cynicism about the GOI's assurance that SOIs will receive government or ISF jobs.

16. (S) Implementation of the transition will largely fall to second Battalion/31st IA commander COL Saeed. Generally considered able, non-sectarian and effective by CF counterparts, Saeed told the EPRT Leader that in the absence of guidance from the MoD or Division leadership, he intends to treat SOIs like regular IA soldiers with monthly pay and standing operational orders. In fact, IA 31st brigade commander BG Abdul Ameer has outlined a comprehensive implementation plan building on relationships developed in recent months which partnered IA company commanders with CF counterparts in organizing and paying the SOIs. Saeed admitted that the November 1 transition target date is ambitious. He is also aware of the concerns of current SOIs and believes it is essential that CF counterparts play an active role in the transition process. Saeed said that 'at least AQI leaders and the worst criminals' should be arrested. Saeed repeated prior concerns that his unit is short of equipment, specifically citing vehicles-he has 21 and needs 37-as hampering his ability to effectively implement SOI transition. Unlike some IP, COL Saeed's troops generally received passing marks for their part in the August 30 raid.

17. (S) In meetings with Sunni and Shia SOI leaders in the Musayyib, Khidr and Jurf as Sukr areas of North Babil, an additional if unstated concern was control of the lucrative SOI

contracts. Typically, SOI leaders are responsible for staffing, arming and managing SOI groups of 100-200, with each SOI earning eight dollars per day. Paid monthly, CF paymasters disburse \$200 directly to each SOI and the remaining \$40 per SOI to SOI leaders. It is widely believed that SOIs kick back a further amount to SOI leaders who thus end up collecting \$4,000 - \$10,000 monthly thanks to the SOI program. SOI leaders have voiced their concern that this lucrative arrangement will be reduced or eliminated. CF believe the pending reduction in this stipend may inspire SOI leaders to engineer 'attacks' in order to demonstrate the necessity of maintaining the current SOI management arrangement.

¶18. (S) With Provincial Iraqi Control of Babil expected before November 1, the security challenges posed by SOI transition loom large. Provincial leaders have not effectively engaged Sunni SOI and community leaders in North Babil. In a meeting with North Babil tribal leaders September 16 (reftel), and in a security coordination meeting with the PRT, EPRT and Brigade leadership September 20, the Governor, Provincial Council Chair, and BG Fadhil (all ISCI or ISCI-friendly) reiterated their intention to arrest SOIs with outstanding warrants. While acknowledging the role of SOIs in establishing security, all said that SOI leaders with arrest warrants would be arrested.

¶19. (S) Comment: While confirming the need for reconciliation, Provincial leaders have not indicated that North Babil SOIs merit leniency, nor have they shown a willingness to turn the page on this chapter of the province's history. They have also failed to leverage the relatively good relations built by the IA with North Babil's Sunnis. If the GOI and Provincial Government does not accommodate SOI concerns about arrest warrants, employ many Sunnis in the ISF (and perhaps buy off their leadership), and demonstrate a non-sectarian approach to dealing with warrants and employment, Sunnis will perceive SOI transition as an unacceptable marginalization. Given that the SOI are believed to retain arms caches, there is a real potential for the current peace to be disrupted.

¶10. (S) Comment Cont: There will no doubt be bumps in the road as the SOI transition takes place in Babil, but the Iraqis here will be able to draw upon experiences gained in Baghdad, which will go first. In any event, SOI transition may take longer than the current Iraqi timeline of November. CF efforts to get the GOI to prepare for this process have started to bear fruit. PM Maliki has issued an order not to arrest SOI leaders, and he has met with SOI leaders to try to ease concerns. Not least of all, Baghdad Operations Command plan to work side by side with CF battle space commanders to oversee contract transition.

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